

PARTIAL VIEW

So we wanted to get rid of this carpet. We borrowed a van and took it to the new Polmadie dump. The carpet was big but not too heavy. It was all we had to put in to the dump.

But we didn't get in.
One of the workers noted down the number plate of the van.

'This van is banned. Someone drove it here before on behalf of a company who defaulted on their payments to the City Council. This van isn't allowed in.'
'That's okay.' I said. 'We can just park here and bring the carpet in ourselves.'

'You can't do that. You can't walk in to this place. Pedestrians are not allowed.'
'But its only one thing – one single item. You can come and look.'

'It doesn't matter if its only one thing. You can't walk in here.'
'Why not?'

'You might get run over.'
'But there's no cars in here at all. This place is deserted.'

'It doesn't matter. These are the rules.'
'So what can we do?'

'You could go to the dump at Helen Street. You can walk in there.'
'How come we won't be run over in Helen Street?'
'I don't know.'

Now we didn't have enough time to go to Helen Street, because we had to give the van back. So we had to go home and dump the carpet in our garden. And tell the same council that it was there.

Weeks passed of course. And the rain fell again and again. Eventually some men arrived and tried to lift it. The carpet was soaking wet and about 10 tons in weight. They nearly broke their backs. But eventually they loaded it up and took it away – to Polmadie Dump.

Everyone knows a story like that – a story where the 'rules' just seem to be stupid. The rules are usually there for a reason but every now and then they will fly in the face of common sense.

Or sometimes the rules might fly in the face of compassion.

Imagine a doctor. This is her day off. She doesn't have to work. And she's in a crowd where someone takes ill and collapses.

A cry goes up *"Is there a doctor here?"*
And the doctor keeps quiet and says nothing. It's her day off. Maybe the ill person ends up dying for lack of medical attention.

The doctor has stuck to the rules. She is not on duty. She is having a break.
But what would we think of her?

Surely we would agree that this was a moment when compassion should have trumped rules?

The woman that Jesus noticed in the synagogue had a partial view of the world. She was bent over and couldn't straighten up and see all that was around her. She can see *something* of what's going on – but she can't see it all.

For eighteen years she had been in this condition.
No one knew what had caused it so people reckoned it must have been an evil spirit. It could have been osteoporosis...?
Anyway, a poor soul indeed.

But there was someone else in that place of worship who also had a partial view. This was the official of the synagogue – a man whose job would be roughly similar to my job here at Langside.

There's nothing wrong with his back or his posture and I imagine his eyesight is as good as those people around him.
His partial view isn't physical – it's spiritual.
He can't see the big picture – he can't see what matters most.
He can see what is important but he can't see what is much more important.

It's the Sabbath day – for the Jews this was Saturday - and there are rules for this day.

The Sabbath was a gift from God –
a day to stop working,
a day to have a rest, a break from toil,
a day for worship and giving thanks to God,
a day for recreation.

It was **(and remains)** an important day.
Our version might be Sunday rather than Saturday, but it is a gift from God that we ignore at our peril.
We need to have a time to break from work.
We need to take time for praise and worship.
We need to take time for rest and recreation.

In fact, never more so in the society that we live in today.

Actually one of the problems we have today is in not taking Sabbath seriously.

We wouldn't want to go back to the days of negativity and sombre rule making when swings were chained up in playgrounds, parks were closed, or where it would be impossible to travel to (or from) a Scottish island on a ferry.
The Sabbath was never meant to be negative dull or boring.

But we have lost something when Sunday is just like every other day, when all the shops are open and families can't be together. And we've lost something even as Christians in our time, when we reckon Sunday is just a day for church if there's nothing else on our agenda, rather than making worship the heart of our week.

Now back in their day the Jews wanted to take this Sabbath day seriously and make it special.
 So they created rules that would guide people – to help them know how to mark it – and what not to do.
 And what not to do was *working*.
 And an awful lot of things were considered to be 'working'.

In this particular day, in this particular synagogue, the official has brought in a guest preacher – he has invited this man Jesus who is causing such great interest. And it's then, presumably after his sermon, that Jesus sees the poor, bent over woman.
 He's not seen her before. He doesn't know her name.
 But he is moved to act, and he uses his power to heal her.

Now did Jesus just forget what day it was?
 Has Jesus forgotten it was the Sabbath?
 As soon as he performed the healing did he suddenly kick himself and say "*Oh no – I shouldn't have done that today*"?

No way!

Jesus knew what he was doing.
 Jesus knew it was the Sabbath.
 That's why they were all there together in the synagogue in the first place.
 He knew the Sabbath rules.

The fact is that when Jesus set eyes on the woman he had a choice to make.

Heal her, and he has broken the rules.
 Don't heal her, and he's obeyed the rules – but maybe she will go through life with this trouble.

So Jesus knows what matters most.

You won't be surprised to know that there is a square in Bethlehem called Manger Square.
 Or that there is a church there called the Church of the Nativity marking the spot where tradition has it that Jesus was born.
 And if you've ever been to Holy Land sites you'll not be surprised to hear that there are different sections to that building – different churches looking after different parts – all with their own worship area. There are Orthodox, Catholic, Coptic and Armenian priests floating around the different sections.

When we were in, there were a group of young German women looking round the Catholic chapel and for a few moments they sat down at a pew. Suddenly there was a noise – kind of angry shouting, as a priest snapped at one of these women who was sitting with her legs crossed. And that was why he was shouting at her – *for crossing her legs*.

Now in case you are wondering, she wasn't wearing a skirt or shorts – she was wearing jeans that covered all of her legs, but somehow this tradition believed that no one should cross their legs in a church because that is casual and there's no place for casual when you are in the presence of God.

I don't know how that German tourist was supposed to know that obscure rule – and as someone who has a degree in theology and has worked in churches for 30 years, I had never heard of it.

I guess for these priests, their daily life must consist of watching busloads of pilgrims and tourists coming in for a few minutes with their cameras and going off again. And I guess it must be quite boring for them.

But imagine, instead of barking out his displeasure at someone breaking some unheard of rule, and walking away, that priest had instead said "Hello!"? Or offered her God's blessing? Or sat down to speak to her about where she was, or who she was, or what she felt about Bethlehem, or told her something about this place?

All he could think of to do was to shout at her for breaking a rule that she knew nothing about. And then he walked away.

There's a blog I read by a pastor called John Pavlovitz. He calls his blog "**Stuff That Needs To Be Said**" and it's a great title because most of what he writes really is stuff that needs to be said.

Just a few days ago he wrote about a friend of his called Emily.

Emily had grown up in church like many people but like many people drifted away after High School. She tried to hold on to her faith but without any spiritual community to support her. Then she started going out with Ryan who had been brought up Catholic but who now was uninterested in faith. After a good few months together as a couple Emily persuaded Ryan to come with her to a church, and they received a good welcome.

They were encouraged to return and so they did.

They started attending services, joined a small group, and met with the minister to discuss life and faith.

To Emily's delight Ryan was finding a new interest in spiritual things and she reckoned they had found a home.

John had sensed a lightness in Emily over their last meetings, but when she met with him last week for coffee he could see that the lightness was gone.

That last week Emily and Ryan had met with their new minister and asked to be baptised. They were excited about the chance to make a public profession of their adult faith.

"That's going to be a problem," he said "Our church won't baptize you if you're living together."

They sat stunned. He continued on.

"I'm not saying you need to get married, and you'll probably practically still be living together, but having Ryan move out will make a statement about your commitment to Jesus."

Emily told the pastor of the financial hardships they'd both faced in recent years, and how sharing an apartment was something they each needed from a basic survival standpoint.

"Well, there are these residential hotels nearby where you can get a room for like, fifty dollars a week." He was clearly not going to entertain their request (for baptism) without a change.

Emily and Ryan told the minister they would talk about it and get back to him and quietly left the meeting.

Right now they're devastated. Right now they feel judged. Right now they're hurting.

Emily said to me, *"This whole thing has changed how this all feels to me. Now I feel like a bad person. For Ryan, it's kinda put the brakes on Church all over again."*

I imagine many of you out there believe this pastor did the right thing.

I disagree with you. I think Jesus does too.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' disciples scold a group of adults who bring their children to Jesus for blessing.

Jesus reprimands them saying: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

He was reminding them that no one gets to give or deny access to Jesus.

Emily and Ryan are children trying to get to Jesus, and their pastor has become a hindrance.

Rather than celebrating their decision to publicly declare their faith together and to walk alongside them, he's taken their cohabitation and made it a baptismal deal-breaker—and there's absolutely no Biblical precedent for it.

This idea that people need to prove their commitment to Jesus to another human being is nonsense.

In the Book of Acts, the record of the early Church's beginnings, the writer tells us of Peter speaking to the crowds, and of three thousand being baptized in a single day.

I could be wrong, but I'm guessing these folks weren't all screened for their living arrangements, sexual orientations, political affiliations, sexual activity, drug use, or any other qualifiers before getting consent.

Their belief and their desire to follow Jesus were the qualifiers.

No one was sitting in front of these folks giving them a list of conditions to meet in order to receive a love that was unconditional.

(John Pavlovitz: Stuff That Need To Be Said, August 12, 2016)

No one needs to earn access to Jesus.
No one needs to find a way to deserve proximity to God.

That's the whole point of having open Communion as we do at this church.
Communion is open to everyone.
Is that because everyone deserves it?
No.
Its because **no-one** deserves it!

Communion is God's gift of God's very self to us – no matter who we are and it is given in love even when we don't deserve it – and that's every single one of us.

Rules and standards of being worthy are not barriers to an encounter with God.

Now someone out there might be thinking.
This minister is saying that Jesus sat lightly to the Law.
This minister is saying that Jesus thought there are more important considerations than the Law.
And if you've heard me at other times, you might be thinking
This minister is saying that there are times when Jesus contradicted and even disobeyed the Law.
And you'd be right.

But what about Matthew 5:17?
"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfil."

Jesus came to fulfil the law. What does that mean?
Cleary that didn't mean agree with all of it!

Jesus meant by fulfilling that he was here to encapsulate the spirit behind the letter – to show what truly mattered in God's eyes.

Jesus knew that some of the law needed improving.
That's why he often used to say *"You have heard it said"*, (and then quote a Law) and then say *"But I say to you"* (and then say something new and better)

Jesus knew that sometimes the Law was superseded by human need, like in today's incident.
Jesus followed the laws as best as he could. He kept the Sabbath.
You can be sure he went to worship regularly each week.
You can be sure he wasn't to be found hammering nails or planing wood in the carpenters shop on the Sabbath Day.

But when he saw that woman in need, he knew that working to help her was more important than some law.

And we know from the gospels that there were other times when Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. (see for example Mark 3:5-6)

The Law is here to help us. The Law is here to guide us.

But when the words of Law becomes more important than Compassion and Love and Spirit –
then Compassion and Love and Spirit must win out!

Jesus responded to that woman's need and healed her, setting her free from the things that held her back and stopped her living life to the full.

Jesus is still healing people and setting them free. And he's not going to stop.

We need to make sure we aren't getting in the way by turning people down rather than inviting them in.

We need to be like doormen helping people in towards God and not bouncers, trying to keep them out.

Luke 13:10-17

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